

Annotated Text Set: Theme Based Anthology

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Theme - Urban Natures: Learning In Place

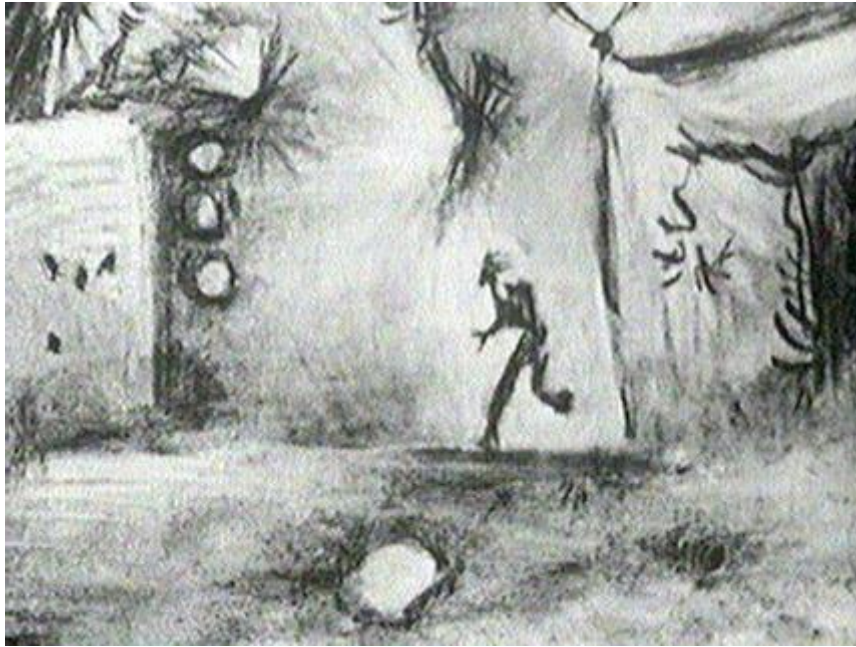
Rationale: The texts in this theme based anthology "Urban Natures: Learning In Place" have been chosen to encourage student reflection about conventional and non-conventional "texts" that surround us. The overarching questions that will be addressed through our engagement with these texts are the following:

- 1) How can reading help us relate to place?
- 2) How do texts inform or construct our understanding of place?
- 3) Can we apply methods used to read conventional literary texts to reading other kinds of texts, like architecture, sculpture, geography, film, photography and beyond?

This set texts has been selected with a group of students living and learning in Toronto in mind. Hence, each of the texts relates to living in an urban setting or is drawn from the setting itself. In both cases, the choices speak to the nature(s) of being urban. As a whole, the texts draw attention to urbanity and ask students to consider how urban space may produce particular kinds of interactions, movements, sounds, thoughts, and cultures. The text set also explores the frequent construction of the urban as devoid of or oppositional to "nature" and points students in directions that may lead them to unpack the assumptions behind what it means to be "natural." Through their readings of these texts, I would like students to think about how we live in space, how we and the spaces around us are co-constructive, and how space is in turn cultural and cultured. By introducing students to a variety of perspectives on and from Toronto, I hope students will come to understand how space may be experienced differently by different groups of people or individuals.

While the focus of this text set is Toronto, the methodology used to design it is grounded in a place-based pedagogical approach. A similar approach to "reading" through place could be adapted to any learning locale with an appropriate selection of texts suited to that place.

Ryan Larkin, *Cityscape* (1966), 1 min 26 sec: http://www.nfb.ca/film/cityscape/related_films

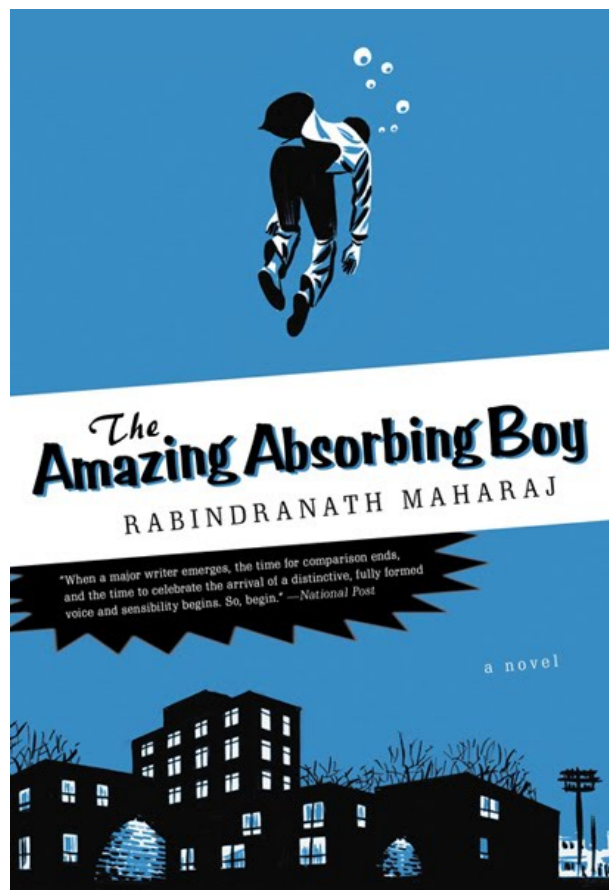


Summary: This short film begins with a dreamlike/nightmarish portrait of urban life filled with a cacophony of urban sounds and the speed and congestion of human and vehicular life. As the film progresses this cityscape transforms into the concluding scene: a peaceful country image with a solitary slow moving figure. The film clearly enunciates the conventional binary between the urban and the rural, a binary in which the city is synonymous with noise, congestion, dirt, anxiety and excess, while the rural is envisioned as peaceful, calm, clean and harmonious.

Rationale: This film offers an excellent point of departure to introduce a conversation about how the city has been juxtaposed (often to the detriment of the urban sphere) with other social and physical geographies. The film can be used to reflect on the "truthfulness" of these representations and to explore the underlying assumptions about who and what makes up these different geographical and social spheres. *Cityscape* is also an excellent text to help students reflect on how we experience the world around us - through movement, sound, sight, etc. Students may consider whether this is an accurate portrayal of how they feel about the urban environment and think about what is at stake in these opposing representations of the country and the city.

Extra: *Walking* (1968), 5 min 6 sec, http://www.nfb.ca/film/Walking/related_films, is another short and celebrated film by Larkin. It would be an excellent film to use if the instructor wants to expand on the theme of how we move through space. Some questions that could be considered, particularly in relation to *Walking*: How does our movement through space facilitate or dissuade particular kinds of interactions? What kinds of people or bodies have been and/or are limited, restricted, censured or sanctioned as they move through space? How?

Rabindranath Maharaj, *The Amazing Absorbing Boy* (2010)



Summary: Touching on broader themes of adolescence, loss, displacement and the socio-economic and ethnocultural challenges of immigrating to a new country and home, *The Amazing Absorbing Boy* can allow students to think deeply about narrative perspective and how storytelling can be used to help us make sense of the world around us and our place in it. In this novel, readers experience Toronto through the eyes of a 17 year-old young man, recently arrived from Trinidad, now living in Toronto. As the book chronicles Samuel's exploration of Toronto, his love of comic books intervenes in his engagement with the city and its inhabitants in fantastical and imaginative ways.

Rationale: This text offers students a clear example of how personal perspective can influence and guide our relationship to and understanding of place. Since the protagonist of the novel uses his own reading experience and preferences to help him navigate his exploration of Toronto, the book works as a metanarrative for the ways in which literature can impact and intersect with our lived realities. It is likely

that students may find Samuel, as a consequence of his age and his enthusiasm for comic books, a character to whom they can easily relate. As a means of having students reflect on their own experience of place, students will be able to compare and contrast their relationship to Toronto with Samuel's. In addition, the metaphor of absorption as a mode for which we may "take in" place, as porous bodies interacting with the fluidity of our milieu, offers an intriguing new mode of sensory relationship to place to be explored with students.

Chris Shepherd, *Osgoode Subway Station, Bay, & Humberside Collegiate Institute Classroom*

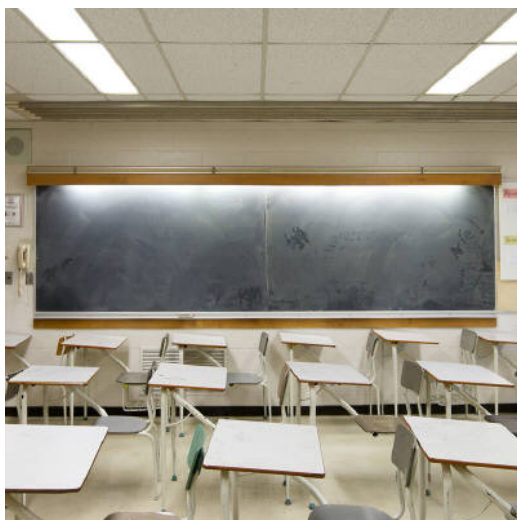


Summary: These images are drawn from collections of Chris Shepherd's photographs which are organized along the following themes: Learning, Transitions, Waiting. In the first collection, he concentrates on public schools in the TDSB. In the latter two, he turns his lens to Toronto's subways - platforms and transitional spaces.

Rationale: Images from these collections can inspire students as they continue to reflect on and "read" the urban environment. Shepherd's images of schools may be particularly compelling for students, bring into focus and artistically representing a familiar landscape. Do these images make students think or feel differently about the walls that surround them daily? Have they thought of their school as a potentially aesthetically appealing or inspiring place? What would their artistic representation of their school look like? The images of schools may also help students recognize schools as integral parts of the cityscape. These are buildings with

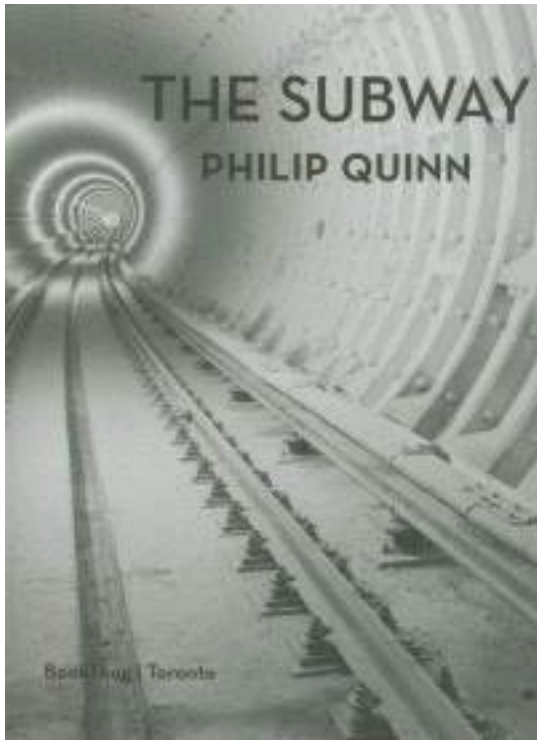


particular designs, geographies, histories and futures.



In the subway-focused collections, the colours, lights, shapes and angles accentuated by the images are striking. They draw the viewer's attention to the details of spaces that are conventionally viewed as functional. The static nature of the photograph as a medium of representation contrasts with the subject matter - locations that are primarily about movement and speed. How do these images further conversations about how we move through Toronto? What do we make of the subterranean life of the city?

Philip Quinn, *The SubWay* (2008)



Summary: Delving more deeply in the subway as a means of exploring the geography, the history, and the psyche of a city and its people, *The SubWay* is part poetry, part photographic history, part found text, part prose. Through this collection, Quinn examines the relationship between Toronto's subway, the historical development of the city, and its contemporary rhythms and movements. He looks at the subway as a complex space where both intimacy and anonymity exist in flux between riders.

Rationale: Through poetry, prose, and found text, this collection offers a different textual variation on the theme of the subway that has been recurring through Rabindranath's novel and Shepherd's photography. This text is particularly interesting for the way in which it blends forms and brings a history of urban development into conversation in our exploration of place. The bodily metaphors that Quinn uses to think about the function of the subway also lend themselves to having students think

about other ways in which the city may be thought about metaphorically as a body. *The SubWay* also allows students to meditate on how economics works to shape particular geographies. This can lead to a more complex and wider reaching consideration of how socio-economic factors have an impact on development and spatial relationships. An example of an essential question that students may explore through their reading of this text: How and why are particular neighbourhoods and citizens (dis)connected from/to one another?

Lila Karim, *In These Streets* (2011), 1 min

<http://www.torontourbanfilmfestival.com/films/these-streets-0#film-info-and-credits-wrapper>



Summary: This short film won the 2011 "Poetic Toronto" award at the Toronto Urban Film Festival. Simple in concept, the film image, in black and white, follows a streetcar track with text (a poem) layered on top of the image. The moving poem ultimately conveys a shared solidarity between the speaker and the reader over the fluctuating possibilities and pitfalls of our experiences and emotions in "these streets."

Rationale: In some ways the simplicity of this film may inspire students, suggesting tangible ways that they could artistically express their thoughts and feelings about where they live. The visual poem is very accessible and a potentially useful way to demystify poetry for students. The form would be easily replicable if the instructor wanted students to create a poem in a similar vein. Using the phrase "In these streets" could be an inspirational and open-ended jumping off point. In relation to the other texts in this text set, not only does this poem expand upon the themes of movement and transportation raised in the other texts, it also offers an opportunity for students to think about the relationship between images and words: Why was the streetcar track chosen as the image around which to structure this poem? Does the image reinforce, strengthen or run contrary to the message being conveyed by the poem?

Public Space and Urban Architecture



1) Nathan Phillips Square

2) Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, Royal Ontario Museum

3) Sharp Centre for Design, Ontario College of Art and Design

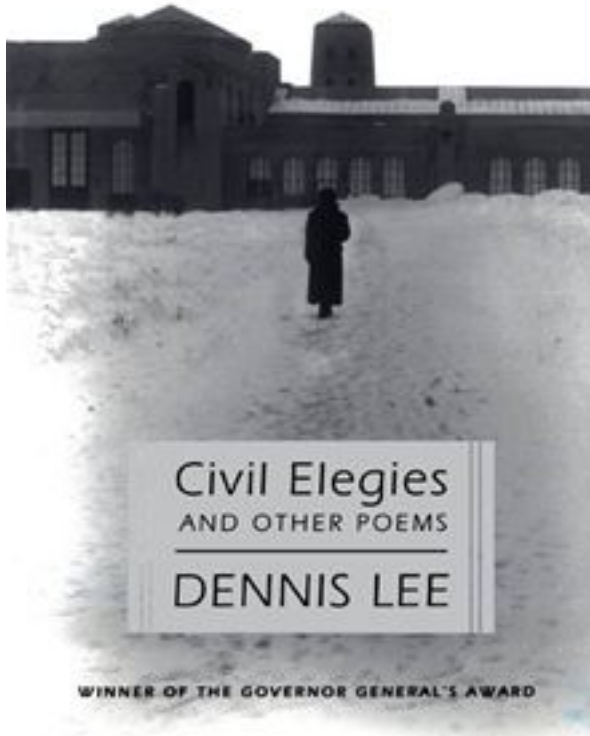
Summary: These three sites and/or buildings represent some of Toronto's iconic architectural landmarks. They all contribute to the physical space of Toronto and have an impact on our aesthetic relationship to the city. Nathan Phillips Square, situated in front of New City Hall was completed in 1965 and was designed as a civic gathering space. Its construction, along with New City Hall, was not without controversy, as the location they are built upon required the expropriation of land and the demolition of residences and businesses in a neighbourhood historically home to many recent immigrant groups.

The Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, designed by Daniel Libeskind (completed 2007), and the Sharp Centre for Design, designed by Will Alsop (completed 2004), are both extravagant additions to pre-existing buildings.

Rationale: Through an exploration of several architectural monuments, students can think more broadly about the aesthetics of Toronto from the grand to the mundane. They may consider the city's physical development through time - how the new and the old may or may not coexist. In thinking about the

physicality of urban space, students can explore the politics of urban development and gentrification. Ideally, an integral part of this learning would involve field trips to these sites as well as opportunities to explore the school's own neighbourhood. In this way, as we begin to move through the city together, we would extend classroom learning about movement and perception in space/place.

Dennis Lee, "Civil Elegies"

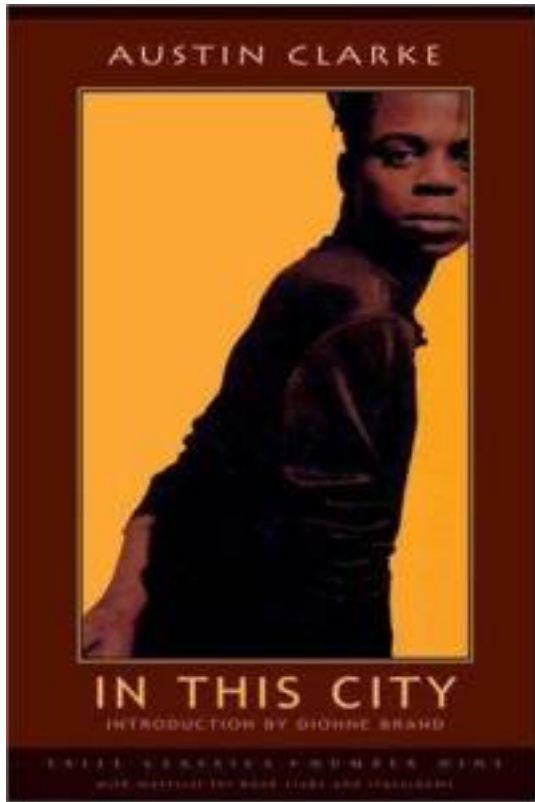


Summary: Student and teachers may or may not be familiar with Dennis Lee's more well-known work as a poet for children, especially as the author of *Alligator Pie*. However, he is also well-known for his book of poetry *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, for which he won the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1972. The main bulk of the collection is made up of "Civil Elegies" a series of nine long poems that meditate on the history, present, and possible futures of Canada. Much of the writing in this series of poems is grounded in Lee's own experience living in Toronto, and his meditations that arise from his observation of city dwellers and urban space are compelling.

Rationale: In relation to this text set, I am particularly interested in parts of "Civil Elegies" where Lee's writing is vividly reflective of Toronto. The inspiration he draws from the crowds he observes in Nathan Philips Square may be particularly interesting to students, especially after having studied (and hopefully) visited the square themselves. Including Lee's poetry in this text set offers lots of opportunity for students to engage in comparative analyses across genre and through their

different reading experiences. I envision ways in which Lee's writing could be used to help students craft their own writing projects about place either in poetry or prose. I also like the analytical possibilities of Lee's language: What constitutes "civic" space, and what is the relationship between the "civic" and "civility"?

Austin Clarke, *In This City* (1992)



Summary: Much of Austin Clarke's literary work is focused on urban life and Toronto. A number of his works would be an excellent addition to this text set. His collection of stories *In This City* returns its gaze to Toronto. The city is revealed through the lives and experience of characters who speak to realities informed by migration, displacement and a sense of homelessness or feeling out of place in this city and country. Beautifully written, the stories reveal intimate narratives that offer frequently very painful but necessary perspectives on urban life in Toronto.

Rationale: All of Austin Clarke's work is extremely powerful and tackles challenging themes related to immigration and belonging that are relevant to the experiences and histories of many people living in Toronto. As a reader, I admire Clarke for the way in which his works consistently speak to the experience of anti-black racism in Canada. I included this book in this text set because of its explicit connection to the theme of the city and the genre - the short story is extremely accessible for students; the length of these stories allows for students and instructors to take up the

important issues raised in Clarke's writing together in detail. Having students read one or several of the short stories in this collection will offer students an excellent introduction to Clarke's work. I believe that student's will be inspired by the beauty of Clarke's writing and appreciate Clarke's uncompromising artistic resolve to call attention to the challenging, inhospitable, and often alienating experience of urban living for particular communities.

Noel Harding, *Elevated Wetlands*



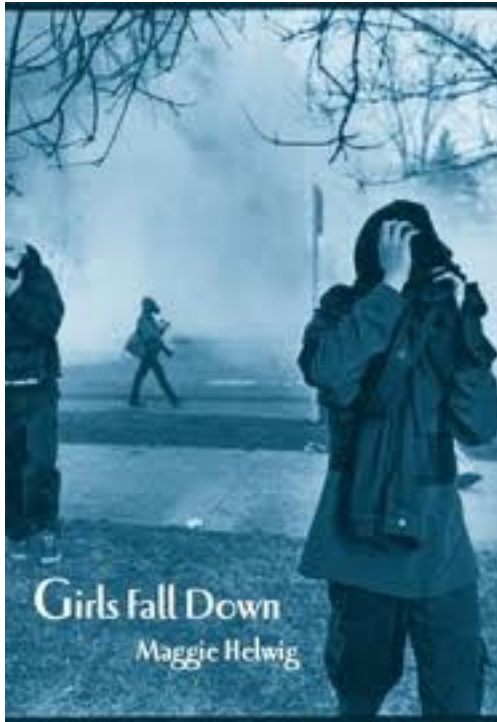
Summary: Noel Harding's public art installation *Elevated Wetlands* (1998, 2005) is located in Taylor Creek Park. The park follows the path of Taylor-Massey Creek, one of the Don River's tributaries. The environmental health of this tributary is questionable, largely because of the strain of being entirely surrounded by an urban environment without proper water flows and drainages. Harding's sculptures, visible from the Don Valley Parkway, are whimsical and intriguing installations that combine a playfulness of appearance and a magnitude of size to effectively draw attention to the terrain around and beneath them.

Rationale: Harding's art installation can be used as an excellent starting point to have students think about the relationship of urban space to the "natural" environment that we customarily associate as existing beyond the boundaries of the city. I see the main function of Harding's sculptures as drawing attention to the specificity of place in which they are situated. The relationship of tenuous co-existence between Taylor Creek Park and the city that surrounds it is brought into focus by the counterintuitive combination of materials that form Harding's living sculptures - concrete, earth, and plant life. The almost comic lopsidedness of the sculptures draws attention to the imbalance or precariousness of the wetland's existence within the city, and the connections and flows that move between the sculptures and the ground speak to the theme of interconnectedness so important in both ecology and human relations.

As a city, Toronto has an extremely large number of urban parks (it even has a functioning farm in the middle of the city), yet we rarely think of defining Toronto in terms of its natural spaces or beauties. Are parks, with their planned designs, natural? In this day and age, where humans can access any wilderness - deserts, rainforests, mountaintops, the arctic - and consciously decide what spaces to develop and how, is any place natural anymore? Does being natural matter? What kinds of wildernesses can our students think of in the city - rooftop gardens, backyards, public parks, the subway, the lake, the market? Posing these questions to students can be both a literal and conceptual challenge, as students evaluate what constitutes wilderness and nature and consider the relationship of these constructs to urban space and the environment.

A listing of other public art projects in Toronto: http://www.toronto.ca/culture/public_art/ongoing.htm

Maggie Helwig, *Girls Fall Down* (2008)



Summary: *Girls Fall Down* is a novel grounded in the specificity of Toronto, yet it speaks to general themes related to urban living and how this configuration of space and people can engender or amplify paranoia around issues of contagion and violence, particularly in the post-9/11 context. Returning us again to the subway as a pivotal urban space in the novel, *Girls Fall Down* is a novel that unpacks fear and love in a specifically urban and multicultural context.

Rationale: Having grown up in the post-9/11 context, this novel speaks to a specific reality to which our students can intimately relate. Students may be drawn in to this text through the very detailed representations of the city in which they live and the suspenseful plot. After capturing their attention in this way, this narrative can be used as a useful means of engaging students in conversations about the kinds of fears that are encouraged in or inspired by the urban context through the media, our schools, our families, and our

communities. Some questions for consideration: How is the subway in this text represented differently/similarly to the ways in which we have seen it represented in other texts? Do students feel that the fears elaborated in the novel are a specific product of the urban context? Does fearfulness impact the lives of certain populations in the city differently or more/less than others? What is the relationship between love and fear? Does Toronto function as its own kind of character in the novel?

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